# The Narrative of James Albert Gronniosaw: A Study in Reverse Acculturation

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## I

Karen McCarthy Brown asserts "transatlantic slavery is to history as black holes are to the reaches of space: we know their presence only by the warping effect they have on what surrounds them" (Mizruchi 31). Indeed, the slave narrative had proven to be a trusted literary device for an authentic interpretation of the distorting impact of slavery to the general public. While the noted examples of the genre, among them especially the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) illustrated how the "peculiar institution" dehumanized both the slave and owner, the account of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw titled *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince as Related by Himself* considered the second slave narrative after Briton Hammon, attempts to approach the concept and practice of enslavement from a different angle.

Walter Shirley's introduction noting that "THIS Account of the Life and spiritual Experience of JAMES ALBERT was taken from his own Mouth and committed to Paper by the elegant Pen of a young LADY" creates a contrast between the teller of the tale and the recorder from the very beginning of the text. Moreover, along with an obvious indication text is dedicated to the Countess of Huntingdon. Although originally there were no plans for the publication of the memoir, as the text was produced "for […] private Satisfaction," financial and didactic considerations justified the respective release: "But she has now been prevail'd on to commit it to the Press, both with a view to serve ALBERT and his distressed Family

[…] and […] this little History contains Matter well worthy the Notice and Attention of every Christian Reader." [1]

In his study of British Romantic writers Nigel Leask elaborated the concept of reverse acculturation, originally a hegemonic impulse entailing the reinterpretation of the social dynamics in India according to western needs, thus acquiring an understanding of the culture of the oppressed (9). Conversely, Jeffrey Gunn viewing reverse acculturation as a process of learning the literary culture of the oppressor in order to further one's ends (http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_64274_en.pdf) casts the respective scenario in a counter-hegemonic context.

Accordingly, I regard the acquisition of literacy as the keystone component of the reverse acculturation process eventually facilitating the cultural construction of the Self, an impulse, which according to Catherine Belsey encompasses the destruction of stereotypes and the inscription of the reconstructed Self into the dominant culture. The purpose of this essay is to explore the specifics of reverse acculturation focusing on the impact of learning the "word" along with immersion into Christianity as reflected in the Gronniosaw narrative.

## II

James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw is the offspring of a royal family from the West African region of Bournou. As the grandson of the king of Bournou and youngest of six children surrounded by a loving family, especially by a mother and grandfather who almost "doated (sic) on him," he became intrigued by the metaphysical aspects of his surroundings in early childhood. Driven by "a curious turn of mind," he began to ponder such questions as the origins of the universe. Feeling a certain intimidation by a yet to be identified "GREAT MAN of power" causing storms and other violent weather phenomena, the young prince's beliefs in an omnipotent transcendental being clashed with the animistic convictions of his people causing him significant emotional distress and mental anguish.

His lengthy spell of melancholy appeared to be broken only when a merchant trading with ivory from the Gold Coast offered to take him away as an apprentice. James Albert's hopes, lured by the promise of

[1] The primary source utilized in this essay is the electronic version of said Narrative as listed in the Works Cited section.

expanding his personal horizons and being shown "houses with wings to them walk upon the water" were soon dashed and repeated threats were made on his life. First a jealous colleague of the merchant attempted to kill him, then considered as a potential spy, the king of the Gold Coast planned to have him executed. Having displayed a similar personal poise to that of John Marrant, a captive of Indians quoting Scripture in front of his indigenous master, James Albert's sheer presence and "undaunted courage" led the king to change his mind.

The young prince's unwitting display of bravery earned him another chance at life, yet in the chains of enslavement. Nevertheless, refused for his small size by a French slave trader, once again he had to face the looming threat of execution. His life was saved only after imploring the captain of a Dutch slave ship to be taken aboard. "I ran to him, and put my arms round him, and said, 'father save me' […] And though he did not understand my language, yet it pleased the ALMIGHTY to influence him in my behalf." One notable aspect of the physical context is that James Albert running to and hugging the captain enacts a traditional parent-child encounter in addition to intimating the potential redemption to be gained from his relationship with the Divine Father. Yet, one can hardly ignore the irony that in this case slavery is presented as a life saving option instead of a threat of social and often physical death. In the same vein it is noteworthy that while both the Indian captive and the young prince allude to divine interference behind their escape, Gronniosaw invokes the Redeemer at the beginning (!) of his slavery experience.

Having been taken on the Dutch slave ship, his physical appearance is changed, as his gold chains and other bodily decorations are removed prior to being "clothed in the Dutch or English manner." It is aboard the slave ship where the famous Talking Book episode takes place. This trope identified by Henry Louis Gates in several Afro-American autobiographical works including the narratives of John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, and Ottobah Cugoano, mainly refers to an encounter between the non-white person, or in most cases the slave, and the liturgical texts and practices of Christianity. The young slave witnesses the captain reading to his crew from the Bible, but later he is sorely disappointed as he puts his ears on the same pages, but the Book "does not talk" to him. Although he attributes his failure of being understood or accepted by the Book to his blackness, the actual reason for his inability to decode the text is his lack of literacy.

It is at this very point, when Gronniosaw an African slave, is confronted with the literary culture of his oppressor, or by extension in the clash of oral African and written European civilization, the former is defeated. At the same time the captain provides an example of elocution, a common form of public discourse in the 18th century. Dwight Conquergood viewed such process as the verbal equivalent of the enclosures within the domain of speech "sei(zing) the spoken word […] and ma(king) it uncommon, fencing it off with studied rules, regulations, and refinements"(143).The captain reading to his crew, that is by "rerouting literacy through oral communication" created the very bridge between the literate elite and illiterate masses (Conquergood 146) that enabled Gronniosaw to make his first figurative steps toward literacy. Experiencing "the Book's silence as a culminating moment of his exile and excommunication and as a profound rejection of his humanity," (Conquergood 149) provides ample inspiration for seizing the "word."

After arriving in Barbados he is sold for 50 dollars to a "young Gentleman" in New York. Since he becomes a slave in the North, the conditions of his servitude are notably better than that of his counterparts forced to work in southern plantations. While serving as a house servant to a master described as "very good" he begins to learn the English language, if only at first in the form of cursing expressions. At the same time it is demonstrated by a wholehearted acceptance of a fellow slave's identification of blackness with evil that his removal from his original cultural roots and racial identity is intensified. Having been rebuked by Old Ned the elderly house slave for cursing, he is reminded by the latter of the black devil burning those using foul language in hell. He not only accepts the apocalyptic black devil concept, but passes this myth on to his young mistress, when he scolds her for using curse words. Nonetheless, when he reports on Old Ned's punishment Gronniosaw offers an indirect criticism of the inhumanity of slavery. All in all the whipping of the erudite slave functions as a covert condemnation of the institution for its denial of education for and cruelty to the enslaved.

Becoming a slave in the house of a minister brings temporary improvement in his fate as the literacy acquisition process along with a familiarization with the liturgical practices of Christianity begin with Mr. Freelandhouse and his family. Being made to kneel down and witnessing prayers the young slave is indoctrinated into both the physical and ritual aspects of Christianity. Although still a novice at the English language the minister "taking great pains with him" explains the meaning of prayer and

enlightens him on the concept of God. Consequently, Gronniosaw achieves a full understanding of his spiritual crisis experienced in childhood: “I was only glad that I had been told there was a God because I had always thought so.”

Gronniosaw’s unique and favored treatment continues as he is sent to school eventually acquiring literacy and thus obtaining the “word.” While previously a mere encounter with Christian liturgy amused him, now understanding Scripture evokes anguish such as applying the warning from Revelations to his own experience he assumes the potential guilt of those responsible for the Crucifixion: “Behold, He cometh in the clouds and every eye shall see him and they that pierc’d Him.” This episode at the same time highlights the faith defending function of the Narrative. The text not only documents the spiritual growth of the African Other from heathen to devout believer, but at the time when overall religious commitment tended to decline in British North America, Gronniosaw taking the sermon to heart demonstrates a depth of personal spiritual conviction George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and other leading figures of the Great Awakening dared only to hope for. Although his mistress introduces him to other examples of Christian literature including John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) and Richard Baxter’s *Call to the Unconverted*, (1657) severe melancholy based upon a self-perceived wickedness eventually culminates in a suicide attempt. His troubles are further exacerbated by the rejection experienced among his peers as he is falsely accused of stealing tools.

Gronniosaw demonstrates a perspective not unlike that expressed by William Adams in his *Memoirs* (1650): “I was born a sinner into an evil world.” His constant battle with a troubled conscience echoes the convictions of such leading figures of colonial culture as John Winthrop and Jonathan Edwards. Accordingly Winthrop laments: “In my youth I was very lewdly disposed, inclining unto and attempting (so far as my yeares enabled mee) all kind of wickednesse” (199), and Edwards offers a similar admission:”I had great and violent inward Struggles: ‘till after many Conflicts with wicked Inclinations” (326). His spiritual imbalance is paired with physical and bodily tribulations: “I could find no relief, nor the least shadow of comfort; the extreme distress of my mind so affected my health that I continued very ill for three Days and Nights.” Likewise, only a reinforced commitment to the tenets of Christianity can offer any remedy. Immersion into Christianity notwithstanding, Gronniosaw finds

spiritual comfort under an oak-tree anticipating the Black Sacred Cosmos concept.[2]

Moreover, it is under the oak tree that his entry into Christianity becomes permanent as he becomes part of a covenant with God. The reinforcement of one's religious commitment in the wilderness is not unprecedented in colonial culture. Isaac Jogues, a French missionary, captured by Mohawks in the early 1640s found comfort by carving crosses on trees, thereby establishing an altar in the forest. Moreover, Anne Bradstreet in a spiritual narrative in poetry form titled "Contemplations" (1678) also muses under a "stately oak," in fact worshiping the Sun as the "Soul of this world, this universe's eye" (214). However, these texts also differ in a noteworthy aspect, namely Jogues and Bradstreet were aware of their worlds' Creator, while the young Gronniosaw only alluded to it.

Gronniosaw's spiritual and psychological crises reflect the instability of the self, or in other words a lack of inner balance singled out by Steven E. Kagle as the primary trigger behind the life writing process (8). Kagle identifies confessional, revelatory, and directive functions of autobiographical works as well. The confessional aspect included private reflections on the author's self-professed sinfulness, the revelatory side recorded natural and societal events testifying to Divine interference, and the directive function manifested in recommendations helping the reader to become a better follower of God's teachings (30).

Consequently, Gronniosaw deals with spiritual isolation via "writing," or in his case indirect text production. His mental anguish leading to a suicide attempt is triggered by his self-image as a sinner. The Narrative abounds in the revelatory identification of divine intent or the recognition of redemptive suffering, suffice to refer to the protagonist's positive appraisal of his ordeal: "I'm thankful for every trial and trouble that I've met with," or to the identification of Providential will behind the untimely death of a sailor depriving him the consolation of the Bible. While reading Scripture on a pirate ship, an act suggesting or implying the sinner's need for Redemption by itself, a mate tears the Book from his

[2] According to C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya the Black Sacred Cosmos concept describes the religious perspective of the African-American community including the sacred nature of the whole universe, the need for conversion to Christianity along with the inclusion of African deities and spiritual forces in the syncretically formed spiritual sphere (2).

hands and throws it into the sea. Gronniosaw is comforted by the recognition of the working of Divine Providence as his attacker is the first to die in an upcoming ambush. The directive function is palpable in Gronniosaw's self image as a pilgrim striving for salvation and spiritual perfection thereby promoting the internal cohesion of the Christian community as well.

The promise of salvation is innate to experiencing inclusion into the covenant, presently, the covenant of grace, initiated by God. As Jeremiah 32:40 holds the collateral of this "everlasting covenant" is the fear of God, or in other words Gronniosaw constantly questioning himself on his own worthiness for the divine alliance. At the same time the protagonist's liberation by his dying master indicates a correlation between manumission and the acceptance of the tenets of Puritanism. Despite his immersion into Puritan theology his inner stability is short-lived as being periodically thrown into the throes of self-doubt and spiritual crisis serves as a reminder that a true Christian has to earn salvation on a daily basis.

Gronniosaw's spiritual development can be interpreted along Schleiermacher's theological continuum ranging from the Pre-communion state characterized by living in collective sin, via Regeneration entailing either Justification or Conversion, to Sanctification. Regeneration refers to the achievement of a life with God-consciousness and Sanctification is the extension of that life toward holiness. Justification can be interpreted as the establishment of a permanent relation between man and God, or the formation of a covenant. Consequently as a result of communion guilt consciousness disappears while Conversion, involves an admission and regret for the totality of a sinful past life. (1911), http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/schl/cfguide/cfguide_cross2212.htm).

As a young African child Gronniosaw is in the Pre-communion stage, his God consciousness is not constant and subconscious at best, demonstrated by intuiting a "Man of Power" behind natural phenomena. His Regeneration process begins with his self-recognition as a sinner, both on the collective and the individual level partly from being black and for not being able to interpret Scripture respectively: "I was humbled under a sense of my own vileness." In his case both Justification and Conversion are applicable and this is demonstrated by the formation of a covenant and the admission of non-specified past sins in that order. He continually seeks reinforcement and the quote from Hebrew 10.14 literally indicates the last step, that is, the achievement of Sanctification. Gaining consolation from the above mentioned biblical passage on the

one hand intimates a status of chosenness, and refers to the Regeneration process experienced by the protagonist on the other: ”Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them. For by one offering. He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.”

Despite gaining freedom Gronniosaw experiences serious financial difficulties following the death of his master and in order to escape from pressing debts he turns to privateering. Upon his return, all his earnings are taken from him by an unscrupulous creditor, who also meets an untimely fate by dying at sea. Living amidst virtually perpetual financial difficulties his spiritual development reaches a milestone, as he makes the personal acquaintance of George Whitefield, one of the leading figures of the Great Awakening. Inspired by Whitefield’s teachings he decides to settle in England, the country he considers as the ultimate manifestation of Christianity. His expectations of finding “goodness, gentleness, and meekness” are daunted as he is defrauded by a deceitful pub owner. Consequently, inverting his original perspective, a technique attributed to reverse acculturation, he offers a painfully disillusioned appraisal of contemporary British society: “I thought it worse than *Sodom.*” While help received from other Christians reinforces his faith, he decides to travel to the home country of Mr. Freelandhouse.

When in Holland he functions as a reification of God’s Providence, virtually serving as a teaching tool via reporting on his spiritual development to a panel of “38 Calvinist ministers” for seven weeks. Within this context Gronniosaw’s life as the African other demonstrates the basic principles of Christianity at work, thereby promoting and defending Puritanism at the time of respective challenges and a loosening of spiritual devotion both in North America and in Europe. It is also remarkable that his trials and tribulations were committed to paper by his listeners “as (he) spoke it.” Thus once again text production takes center stage in the Narrative, which is created via dictation to another person in the first place.

While reciting his experience Gronniosaw insists on referring to his privileged upbringing and the royal family background eventually presenting the embodiment of the “Noble Afric” stereotype. This image is put forth among others by Aphra Behn in *Oroonoko* (1688), whose protagonist as an African prince sold into slavery via deceit is in fact a prototype of Gronniosaw. Such application of the “Noble Savage” image to blacks is present in Dagoo, the harpoon man in Melville’s *Moby Dick*

(1851), in the figure of Bras-Coupé of George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880) and in the title character of Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* (1920). The Noble Afric image, however, could not be applied across the African–American experience as according to Zsolt Virágos, the Noble Savage, or the "aristocrat of nature" trope was reserved for the Indian, a race not impacted by slavery (92).

What can be considered the ultimate impact of Gronniosaw's reverse acculturation, primarily expressed by learning the word? Attending school implying a separation from peers amounts to culture shock and the subsequent anguish in fact reinforces the conclusion of Ecclesiastes 1:18: "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." While the writing process indicates the achievement of subject status, the subject in question is fully accommodating to mainstream culture. His view of slavery as a means of escape from potential death is a major digression from the primary trope of the slave narrative genre. Moreover, the description of the Middle Passage is scant at best, along with sparse if any references being made to the forsaken home in Africa. Furthermore, Gronniosaw has distanced himself from the black community from early childhood, demonstrated by the contrast between his "beloved sister" Logwy and the rest of his family: "she was quite white, and fair, with fine light hair though my father and mother were black."

While Frederick Douglass, by "extracting meaning from nothingness," (Baker 39) became a public figure, Gronniosaw never reached this status as personally he did not speak up against slavery and his example was used primarily by the clergy to reinforce the tenets of Christianity. He does not escape from slavery as his freedom is given to him by a "kind master." Although he implies the responsibility of African tribal and national leaders in the slave trade, the Narrative does not contain a direct condemnation of commerce in human flesh. The concept of slavery is only a bye-plot at best, as the authorial focus is directed upon spiritual growth, commemorating a journey from "the grossest Darkness and Ignorance to […] the Light of […] Truth." Moreover, the Narrative raises the dilemma of Philip LeJeune's autobiographical pact as Gronniosaw is the narrator and protagonist, but hardly the actual author of the text. Said situation is the reversal of Mary Jemison dictating her life experience to Dr. James Seaver, referring to himself as the author of the given captivity narrative. Certainly Gronniosaw's account also helps the

reader to obtain a 'plan of life' to guide him or her through the world "on paths of morality" as pointed out by Dr. Seaver (49).

## III

Gunn identifies reverse acculturation as a tool to alter and improve the position of African slaves in the slave trade. Gronniosaw's attempt at acquiring the literary culture of the oppressor is motivated by a desire for acceptance by the Anglo mainstream complemented by a need to escape from an ongoing spiritual crisis. The Narrative does not write the slave into being via the "creation of a human and liberated self" (Baker 31) as Gronniosaw's subject status is always conveyed through others. The main turns in his life are generated by external sources. It is a spiritual crisis that leads to removal from his home, a place he never returns to. He escapes death not by his own act, but by an unwitting display of courage. Moreover, even when his life is in danger he is waiting for outside help, namely, begging to be taken into slavery. For him blackness connotes evil demonstrated by blaming his skin color for his inability to understand Scripture or by the belief in the black devil snatching those using curse words. He is not shaping his fate, but drifts with the events while testifying to the workings of Divine Providence throughout his life-span. Whereas in slave narratives the quest for freedom is the central trope, Gronniosaw at best attempts to find understanding or knowledge during his life. Nevertheless as Vincent Carretta pointed out the Narrative via demonstrating slaves' capability to acquire literacy made an unwitting, yet significant contribution to the abolition movement. Indeed, as aptly summed up by the concluding section Gronniosaw is truly a pilgrim waiting for the "gracious call," on a quest for the Heavenly City, a destination receding further and further from sight with each passing day.

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